ABC NEWS

POLITICS

Aged care visitor guidelines released after complaints against facilities

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Posted Fri 1 May 2020 at 12:59am, updated Fri 1 May 2020 at 2:07am

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Aged Care Minister announces $205m in funding

After reports of family and friends being banned from visiting loved ones in aged care facilities, the sector and the Federal Government have put together draft guidelines to make sure everyone is on the same page.

The draft Visitor Access Code was released today to provide a "nationally consistent visitation policy" and is open for public consultation.

As well as the code, Minister for Aged Care and Senior Australians Richard Colbeck announced an extra $205 million in funding for the sector to cover extra costs arising from the coronavirus pandemic.

He said it would mean every facility would receive $900 per resident.

Key points:

- National draft visitor code now open for public consultation
- Extra $205 million funding announced for aged care sector
- Nationally, 23 facilities have had COVID-19 outbreaks

Mr Colbeck also took the opportunity to "congratulate" the sector on its response to outbreaks, saying 15 of the 23 facilities that reported outbreaks had no cases.

The Minister's comments came on the same day as a 13th person from the Newmarch House aged care home in Sydney died after contracting the virus.

Read our full coverage of the coronavirus pandemic

Who can visit?

The code says providers must "actively facilitate" visits from family members, "families of choice" and friends.

Facilities have scope to create their own solutions through using "a dedicated room, the resident's room, a visiting window or other solution".

You cannot visit a facility, though, if you have cold, flu or any other symptoms associated with COVID-19.

The code also specifies that "at the minimum" entry requirements for visitors will include honestly responding to screening questions, showing you have had your flu vaccination, using hand sanitiser and following what the facility asks to remain safe.

What the experts are saying about coronavirus:

- Economic recovery committee looks set to push for a gas-fired future
- Immunity passports might create a perverse incentive for individuals to seek out infection

A person's hand rests on top of an elderly woman's hands. *(Pixabay: sabinevanerp)*

How long can they stay?

This depends on the health of the person in the facility and what you as the visitor usually do when you go and see them.

The code has suggested two situations where visitors can spend a longer period of time with a resident.

The first is for residents who are dying and "in their final weeks" and the advice is that in-person visits from a small group of loved ones is allowed on a regular basis.

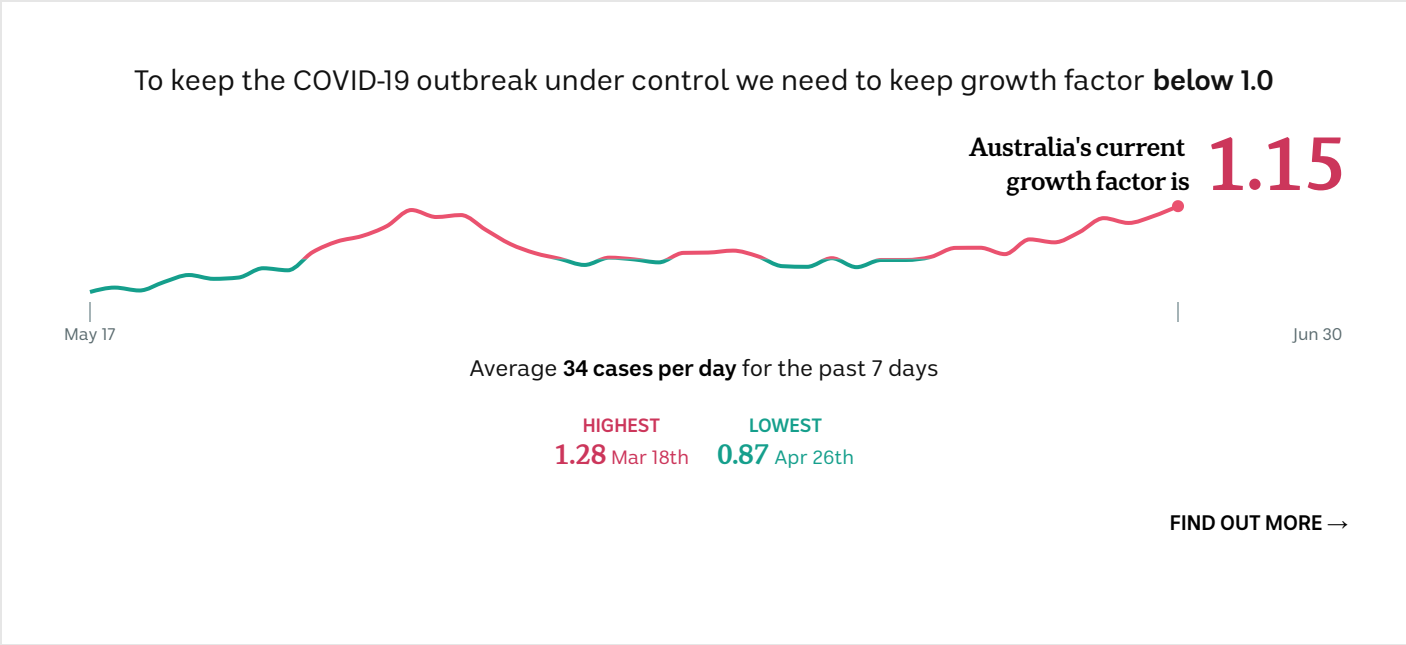
How many people and how long to visit "should reflect what is needed for the person to die with dignity and comfort" and facilities should "err on the side of compassion".

The second situation is when a visitor is involved in providing care for a resident — that could include helping them with meals or managing their behaviour.

In these two situations visitors may be required to wear Personal Protective Equipment.

For everyone else, the code suggests visits remain "short", but it stipulates that a "flexible and compassionate" approach to visiting times should be taken.

Families and friends can also deliver letters and gifts when they like.



Will residents be stuck in their rooms?

If there is no confirmed case at the facility, no.

Part 8 of the draft code says residents "can continue to use public spaces within the facility, including outdoor spaces".

But facilities may be required to put in place limits on how many people can be in one area to comply with social distancing rules.

Residents must also have access to external medical services as long as it is on a safe "but prompt" basis, using telehealth options where possible.

Facilities must also ensure residents have a way to regularly communicate with their families outside of in-person visits.

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What if there is a case at a facility?

If a facility goes into lockdown because there has been a confirmed case or outbreak of COVID-19, "full lockdown will occur" like it does for all other infectious disease outbreaks.

The code makes clear lockdowns should be put in place in a "transparent and well communicated way" and facilities should make sure residents and their families know when the lockdown will be reviewed.

It says in this situation residents "may need to be" confined to their rooms but the facility must still provide activities and exercise that contribute to their quality of life.

The last point in the code also specifies that providers can vary their response to the virus as risks change within their local community.

Public feedback on the code is open until Thursday, May 7 and the Council on the Ageing said it hoped the code would be finalised by May 11.

What you need to know about coronavirus:

- The symptoms
- The number of cases in Australia
- Tracking Australia's vaccine rollout
- Global cases, deaths and testing rates

The Virus